



Original communication

Violence against women: Profile of the aggressors and victims and characterization of the injuries. A forensic study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study, carried out based on examinations of battered women by the Clinical Forensic Service of the Afrânio Peixoto Medical-Legal Institute in the city of Rio de Janeiro, aims to characterize the nature of the injuries suffered by victims of domestic violence and to investigate the motivation of such events, the family situations in which they occur, the habits of victims and aggressors and the social milieu involved.

Method: A questionnaire was given to 1000 battered women attended by that service between October 2009 and March 2012, along with simultaneous quantification/classification of the injuries suffered.

Results: We found a prevalence of working women (63.3%), with at least some high school (46.6%), who were the main household breadwinners (50.9%). In contrast, the largest percentages of male aggressors only had primary school educations at most (45.9%), were illegal drug users (60.4%) and were self-employed/freelance workers (72.4%). Regarding classification of the injuries (according to the Brazilian Penal Code), there were 971 cases of injuries considered slight, 23 of severe injuries and 6 of very severe injuries.

Conclusion: The majority of the women studied continue suffering aggressions even though they have their own means of support without depending on a male companion or husband. The reasons given for accepting the aggressive acts were mainly associated with the psychological sphere, in a relation of dependence and subordination.

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1. Introduction

Although underrepresented on government action platforms, violence against women is no longer treated only as a problem of public health: globally it is seen as a problem of public security without easy solutions, a subject requiring complex discussions. These domestic occurrences often are never even reported to the police authorities, especially when they occur in families with good economic levels. In turn, the concealment of such occurrences out

fear of exposing women to public embarrassment makes it difficult to take the necessary steps to resolve the problem.

According to the literature, it is more common, even repetitive, for domestic violence to be reported when it occurs in low-income households.¹ The high prevalence of such cases suggests that everywhere in the world there are high numbers of women suffering violence, often simply putting up with its consequences.²

The statistics from forensic medical services show growing numbers of aggressions, including those that leave physical signs, such as blows with the hands, weapons or other instruments, burns, attempted strangulation and sexual violence. This tendency has been documented in several studies^{3–6}

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The violence can also be psychological in nature, through humiliation, threat, blackmail or other equivalent behavior, which although possibly causing harm to mental health, generally does not produce technical evidence able to establish a connection between the findings and allegations. Although the mental damages are unpredictable, recent studies indicate they can appear in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anger or feelings of guilt.⁷

The different types of violence are generally committed by intimate partners of the victim, such as husbands or companions.⁸

There are other forms of violence as well, such as exposure to drug dealing, forced prostitution, exploitation of labor, slavery and sex-selective abortion,² which also do not leave signs of forensic interest in the victims.

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 1990) show that among all physical attacks that occur in homes, 63% of the victims are women and girls.⁹

In the work context, because women are used to domestic violence, they customarily see aggressive male behavior as “natural”, reducing their capacity for perception and psychic registration of violence.¹⁰ According to the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for Defense of Women’s Rights, one in five work absences by women on a global basis is due to violence suffered at home.¹¹

In some cases domestic violence against women is accompanied by aggressions against children. The causes indicated as catalysts of conflicts involving women and children are similar to those attributed to violence against women alone: unemployment, alcoholism and domestic stress.¹² This last factor can be attributed to the domestic routine faced mainly by women, with little or no cooperation from the man. Additionally, when the woman works outside the home, the added responsibility for household chores and child care become more mentally trying and can be a further source of domestic conflicts.

In Brazil the situation is similar. In an attempt to deter aggression against women, in 2006 the Brazilian Congress enacted the Maria da Penha Law,¹³ named for a woman from the state of Ceará who became a paraplegic due to an attack by her husband. Among the changes established by the law, domestic violence is no longer considered a petty crime and the maximum penalty is up to three years in prison.

The academic literature has been addressing the problem of battered women and making many contributions to reduce it.^{14–16} Various methods of prevention have been suggested, to deter lethal and non-lethal aggression against women. There is also growing realization that domestic violence that is does not cause severe physical injuries or that is purely mental in nature still causes a heavy toll, ranging from psychological problems to adverse effects on physical health, such as cardiovascular disease, chronic neck and back pain and other complaints.^{17–19}

The search for prevention strategies, for a problem until recently considered private, is today an urgent social need, because not even the revolutionary feminist movements have brought changes capable of abolishing subordination to men. Therefore, epidemiological investigation of the problem is a mandatory task of the public authorities and also is a fertile field for scientific inquiry, through analysis of compulsory notifications and documental records.²⁰

2. Method

The sample of this study was composed of women victims of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner, examined by the Clinical Forensic Service of the Instituto Médico-Legal Afrânio Peixoto (IMLAP) in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the period from October 2009 to March 2012. The article is based on data obtained from 1000 victims of domestic violence who agreed to participate by filling out the questionnaire. In this particular, we did

not document the reasons for refusals, due to the conditions under which the data were obtained.

The forensic service is exclusively dedicated to the determination and description of the injuries suffered by crime victims, without any personal involvement of the examiner with the victim, as dictated by good forensic technique. To complement the descriptions of the injuries suffered revealed by the examinations, the women who agreed to participate were given a questionnaire containing fifteen closed questions and three open questions, seeking to learn the personal aspects of the victims, their aggressors and the reasons for the events:

Age:

Occupation:

The aggressor is your () husband, companion or boyfriend;

() former husband, companion or boyfriend

Is this the first time this has happened? () yes; () no, it has happened other times

Is this the first time you filed a complaint? () yes; () no

Does the aggressor use drugs? () no; () yes; which? () alcohol; () others

Was he intoxicated when he attacked you? () yes; () no; () don’t know

In relation to work, is your aggressor: () employed; () unemployed; () self-employed; () retired?

Who maintains (maintained) the household? () him; () me () both of us

Do you work outside the home? () yes () no

In your opinion, who is (was) boss at home? () me; () my aggressor

What is your schooling level? () 9th grade or lower; () at least some high school; () at least some college

What is the schooling level of your aggressor? () 9th grade or lower; () at least some high school; () at least some college

In general, does your aggressor believe you are () equal, () inferior or () superior to him?

Do you think you are () equal, () inferior or () superior to him?

Do you think for reasons of commodity or because of the children, it is possible you will not carry through with this complaint? () it’s possible; () I intend to pursue the matter no matter what

Are you afraid of your aggressor? () no; () yes

What is he like?

Why did he attack you?

What result do you expect from this complaint?

Besides the questionnaire, the injuries suffered were quantified and classified according to the Brazilian Penal Code,²¹ according to which severe injuries are those that prevent carrying out habitual tasks for more than 30 days, pose a danger to life, permanent debility of a member, sense or function or accelerate birth; while very severe injuries are those that cause permanent disability of a member, sense or function, permanent inability to work, incurable ailment, permanent deformity or miscarriage, and slight injuries are those not fitting in the other two categories.

The study was approved by the research ethics committee of Hospital Universitário Clementino Fraga Filho, under finding number 091/09.

3. Results

The age of the women in the sample ranged from 15 to 69 years. The most common age range was 20–29 years (38.3%), followed by 30–39 years (33.5%).

The declared occupations of the victims were: homemaker, 15.5%; maid: 8.4%; sales worker: 27.4%; office worker: 16.9%; liberal professional: 5.2%; student: 6.5%; self-employed person: 1.7%; and miscellaneous others: 17.1%.

In relation to the conjugal situation with the aggressor, there was rough balance between those who stated the relationship was over and those saying it would be maintained: 45.9% and 52.1%, respectively, while 48% of the women cohabited with their aggressor.

Only 29.1% of the women responded yes to the question “Is this the first time this has happened?”, and 68.7% said it was not. In answer to the question “Is this the first time you filed a complaint?” 19.5% of the women said no and 77.4% said yes.

The use of alcohol and/or other drugs by the aggressor was indicated by the victims in 60.4% of the cases, while 35.9% denied such use had occurred. Regarding intoxication during the attack, 60.3% said no and 22.1% said yes.

Regarding work situation, 63% of the women said the aggressors were employed and 8.3% were self-employed, although 50.9% of the victims said they were the ones responsible for maintaining the home, with only 27.3% stating it was the aggressor and 12.9% saying it was both of them.

The majority of the women stated they worked outside the home (63.6%), while the breakdown of the responses to the question “Who is (was) the boss?” was 46.7% him, 31.0% her and 4.6% both. Curiously, 1% declared the aggressor’s mother was the head of the household.

There was a striking difference in schooling level between the victimized women and their aggressors: the largest portion of the women had high school educations (complete, 40.1% and incomplete, 6.5%) while the largest portion of the men had studied up through ninth grade at most (45.9%). Women with at least some college accounted for 20.6% while this figure for the men was only 13.1%. There were many intimate relations with discrepancies of schooling, such as a woman with only a primary education and a man with a college degree, or vice versa, but the perception obtained from the question “In general, does your aggressor believe you are equal, inferior or superior to him?” was that 54.7% of the women believed the aggressors felt superior, while 45.3% of the women judged themselves to be equal (“Do you think you are equal, inferior or superior to him?”).

Regarding fear of the aggressor, 74% said they were afraid of the aggressor. Nevertheless, 84.3% said they intended to follow through on the complaint. With respect to the subjective questions, such as “What result do you expect from this complaint?”, filtering of the responses showed that the words “justice”/“punishment” were most common (48%), while “his removal”/“peace” accounted for 15%. In much lower percentages were phrases like “I’m afraid of dying” or similar expressions (2.4%) and “this won’t result in anything” (2.3%).

There were many responses regarding the motive for the attack, but it was possible to discern the most relevant factors, all of them referring to the aggressor: jealousy, with 21.9%, anger over separation, with 12.0%, use of alcohol/drugs, with 10.8% and vengeance after discovering infidelity, with 3.7%.

The filtering of the responses on the profile of the aggressor showed that 41.8% of the women used terms like “jealousy”/“possessiveness” or similar, 34.9% employed words like “aggressive”/“violent” or similar, and 15.1% stated “good father” and/or “dedicated to the family”.

The great majority of the injuries suffered by the women were classified as slight (total of 971 cases out of 1000), while the severe injuries were fractures (8 cases) and dental debilities (15 cases). The injuries considered very severe were established by findings of hypertrophied and keloid scars and loss of teeth (6 cases). There

were five cases of complaints about sexual violence, but the laboratory test for the presence of spermatozooids was only positive in one of them, establishing evidence of the crime of rape aggravated by bodily injury. The other four were classified only as bodily injuries.

4. Discussion

Statistical works on the theme of violence against women provide some results, although they are often based on data from services with different analytical parameters. The limitation of the present study is the impossibility of comparing the data here with figures from other forensic medicine institutions, due to the dearth of publications of this nature, particularly in Brazil. Besides this, there are various ways of obtaining and analyzing information depending on the scientific field involved in the study.²²

Nevertheless, studies coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO)^{23–26} contain relevant data on violence against women, but there is still much controversy over the classification of the injuries suffered: “The classification of the severity of the acts of physical violence was done in function of the probabilities of causing injuries. Slapping and shoving were defined as moderate violence, while being kicked, dragged or threatened with a weapon, or the use of a weapon against a woman, was defined as serious violence.” The responses provided by the women in those studies about their injuries were not confirmed by forensic examination to give credibility to their complaints through material confirmation of a crime.

In relation to the age of the victims surveyed, the results of the present study were similar to those of other works.^{27–32} The fact that the aggressions are more often seen in the referred age range can mean greater danger during the period of higher sexual and procreative activity of women, when they still have a body to which men are attracted, or when they still have the desire to maintain their beauty, generating greater likelihood of aggression.

There was no singularity of the results from the questions “Is this the first time this has happened?” and “Is this the first time you filed a complaint?” A total of 68% of the women stated it was not the first time and 195 said it was not the first complaint lodged. This result raises questions about the efficacy of the Maria da Penha Law,¹³ because it appears that the women complainants – as well as the aggressors – do not consider it able to guarantee protection. In reality, the prevalence of violence against women has not diminished since the law took effect. There are often repeated complaints and it takes a long time for the legal proceedings that are carried forward to reach final resolution.³³

Enacted to reiterate rights already established in other statutes, the law appears only to have added expectations in the battered women different from the penal sentences defined. One of the law’s novelties is that the woman can request removal of the aggressor through injunctive measures when she is in a situation of risk. However, the daily number of injured women attended at the IMLAP shows without question that this is not occurring. Many of them arrive alone to be examined, without any accompanying police officer, often with a simple notice to be delivered to the aggressor. Others report that on the first occurrence the judge ordered the aggressor to keep at a certain distance, but the need to pick up children for weekend visits and the absence of another person to do this requires more flexibility, often resulting in renewed aggression.

Perhaps it is the permanent bureaucracy of the police investigative work that makes them unavailable to devote the proper attention to domestic violence cases. The duties consume time and erode the willingness to investigate subjects considered “women’s problems”. It is common for women, when being submitted to

examination of bodily harm, to make negative comments on the attitudes encountered at the police station: “The inspector said this won’t do any good, that it’s only scratches, of no importance.” According to Brandão, “in this respect, it is common to encourage the woman to drop the complaint, by mentioning aspects that will hinder the chance of a guilty verdict against the accused. Together with the central question posed to the victim (“Do you want to press charges or not?”), there are two ‘technical’ arguments: the absence of witnesses and the minor nature of the injury, as attested by the medical-legal institute. The majority of victims are urged to avoid a ‘dicey investigation’”.²⁸ There appears to be a good deal of prejudice and poor preparation of the authorities and functionaries to attend to the needs of battered women. Some officers assigned to specialized police stations set up to serve women state that the number of cases increased after the Maria da Penha Law,¹³ but the majority of women still wind up dropping the case or reaching a settlement before the judge.³⁴

Porto, in an interesting article on the attitudes of the judiciary about violence against women, says about judges: “They do not identify the characteristics of a type of violence that affects women – gender violence – and thus do not act to punish it or deter it. The sentences handed down demonstrate that the judges are basing their decisions on their personal conceptions.”³⁵

Women with many different profiles arrive at the IMLAP. The majority are upset, as can be imagined. But the forensic medical practice surprises: there are victims who are apparently comfortable and loquacious as well as others who are silent and timid. The first bring the assumption that nobody can attack anybody, feel extremely offended and cry. The second, in a demonstration of extreme counter-sense, show the “marks of jealousy”, feel loved and collect police reports. And the women in the last group tend to be resigned to a problem they feel is insoluble. Progiante enumerates the reasons women report aggression by their partner: the event happened in a public place, the event left marks on the victim’s body, the woman faced pressure from others to file a complaint, and they feel the need to protect their children from a situation of risk.³⁶

The number of aggressors reported to be alcohol and/or drug users was high, at 60.4%, a figure in line with those in previous scientific works.^{37,38} Many authors state that this use induces violence against women.^{30,32,33,39,40} But according to Baltieri, it is more common for men that use alcohol to perpetrate sexual crimes.⁴¹ It is interesting to note from the responses that among the unemployed aggressors (226), 76% of them used alcohol/drugs (=172), while among the employed, self-employed and retired ones (total of 724 aggressors), 55% used such substances (=404).

Among the battered women, 63.5% reported they work outside the home and 50.9% said they are the household breadwinners when they cohabit with their partners. Balci found that 63.7% of the battered women were unemployed,³⁷ while Rezende found 45% of the women worked as maids,³¹ in both cases in contrast to the present study, where the largest percentage of respondents reported working in commerce. According to some authors, low schooling levels and unemployment of the victims are factors leading to aggression,^{33,38,39} but in this study, the women with at least some high school education were the most numerous group, at 466 respondents. On the male side, the largest number (459 subjects) had at most ninth-grade educations.

A particular observation is in order about educational level. The questionnaire, which contained three subjective questions, allowed the women to express their feelings on the subject freely – some felt gratified with the opportunity and wrote an entire page. The responses give room for some thoughts on the real educational context in the country.

Since education is an evolutionary process, a progression of acquisition of increasingly complex and challenging knowledge, it

might be that many of these women who mentioned they had completed high school had not managed to assimilate a better understanding of life, due to undemanding classes or overly easy grading to obtain diplomas.

“The difficulties of access to more prestigious careers requiring college degrees, especially in the public sector, when combined with the reduced educational content of secondary schools, have led to extremely high levels of inefficiency in secondary education, which does not prepare or assure access to universities, or provide sufficient professional training”.⁴²

Individuals who live in large cities have more opportunities to advance in their studies, because classes are offered at a wider range of times, enabling them to combine study with other tasks. However, the deterioration of education is the rule, and the requirement to develop reasoning and better understanding, through reading and analysis of texts, does not occur. The presence of many serious grammar errors committed on the questionnaires points to this possibility.

The question formulated to assess the perception of the aggressor about the victim, in the latter’s opinion, revealed that 547 women stated they believed the men felt superior to them. Regarding the women’s view of the men, 453 responded that they feel equal to the men, while 362 felt superior and 120 inferior.

An interesting article about social representations cites several proverbs that reveal the social thinking about violence against women in various countries: “A dog, a woman and a walnut tree, the more they’re beaten, the better they be” (English); “A wife may love a husband who never beats her, but she does not respect him” (Russian); “Women are like gongs – they need to be struck regularly” (Chinese); and “A real man who beats his wife ceases to be a real man if he doesn’t beat her again” (Latin).⁴³

These sayings reflect the virtually universal historic inferiority with which women have been treated, as figures of lesser value. Although this is now changing, particularly in Western societies, largely in response to women’s demands for equal educational and job opportunities and equal pay for equal work, there are still stubborn vestiges of this attitude that are sometimes accepted even by some women who have financial power associated with higher education, out of concern to preserve the family (“for the good of the children”) or to avoid public embarrassment or harm to the family name.

The highest percentages obtained in this study were related to fear of the aggressor (743 women responded positively) and the intention of pursuing the complaint (843 positive responses). Despite the paradox of the two responses, it can be inferred that the recent emotional outrage caused by the traumatic experience can produce a desire to see the perpetrator punished, but this feeling can soften with time. If the questionnaire had been applied at a date more distant from the aggression, the responses likely would have been different.

Authors believe that when women resolve to continue the relationship with their aggressor, regardless of the motive (a feeling that the presence of jealousy indicates Love, fear of breaking up the family, or even for fear of the latent aggressiveness of the man, possibly increased by drug use), a new scenario is configured for renewed future aggression.

This opinion is shared by some other authors, who have added other reasons: unemployment of the woman and her financial dependence, low schooling level, hope that things will get better, low self-esteem,^{36,37} unawareness of rights and lack of information.²⁸

Gadoni-Costa indicates that the explanation for women to remain in aggressive relationships is coping, that is, a response of the victim that seeks to create, maintain or increase the perception of personal control over stressful situations. “Men as a rule repudiate their own responsibility and deny the seriousness of their behavior. Women demonstrate a particular sequence of behavior, perceiving the prevention of new explosions of violence as being

their responsibility. As a consequence, they avoid certain subjects, situations and forms of behavior, which according to their point of view, have the potential of triggering violence.”⁴⁴

The reasons given by the women for the attacks suffered were: jealousy, refusal to accept separation, use of drugs and discovery by the women of male infidelity. When requested by the questionnaire to give the profile of the aggressor, the most common word pairing was jealous/possessive. It is opportune to point out that the age range with greatest prevalence of this response was that of still young women. Otherwise, some authors call attention to the marked difficulty that men have in accepting the end of the relationship.³⁷

Additionally, a word is in order about the new and more flexible design of families, also noted in the study. Three women in homosexual relationships answered the questionnaire and presented similar responses to the other women. They indicated jealousy as the main cause of the aggression, reported high school educations with partners of equal level, mentioned that both partners worked outside the home and that the complaint was the first one filed. Although there have been few scientific studies about domestic violence among homosexual couples, it is possible to suggest that the rates of violence are considerable, perhaps even greater than those found among heterosexual couples.⁴⁵ Among male homosexual couples the theme is still controversial and neglected in the scientific literature, but some studies have suggested these relationships suffer from domestic violence at equal or even greater rates than violence in heterosexual relationships.⁴⁶

Finally, it should be noted that the main scope of this study was to characterize the physical injuries and the people involved. With respect to sexual violence, it was only superficially examined, since only five of the respondents reported this occurrence, and there was laboratory confirmation in only one of these cases. Further studies are necessary on this specific aspect, due to its obvious relevance and the lack of research into this aspect in Brazil.

5. Conclusion

The comparative information on the particularities of the victims and aggressors showed the rates of employment and schooling levels were higher among the women, as was their participation in maintaining the household. Therefore, reasons given for accepting the aggressive acts were mainly associated with the psychological sphere, in a relation of dependence and subordination, rather than economic dependence.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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